

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A NEW NATION

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*These condensed excerpts are from a book by a German visitor, Johann Schoepf. He was a surgeon with the Hessian troops who fought on the side of the British. With peace established by treaty in 1783, he decided to take a trip through the new nation before returning home.*

Who in the fatherland [Germany] has not heard of Philadelphia? William Penn, well known in history, founded the city in 1682, and in the space of 100 years it has grown to a notable size. The city, if not greatly beyond others in America in wealth and number of houses, far surpasses them all in learning, in the arts, and public spirit.



Throughout the city the streets are well paved and well kept. At night the city is lit by lanterns placed on posts.

The streets are kept clean and in good order by the householders themselves. Appointed night-watchmen call out the hours and the state of the weather.

Behind each house is a little court or garden, where usually are the necessaries [out-houses]. The kitchen, stable, etc., are all placed in buildings at the side or behind, kitchens often underground.

In the matter of interior decorations the English style is imitated here as throughout America. The taste generally is for living in a clean and orderly manner, without the continual scrubbing of the Hollanders or the frippery and gilt [fancy style] of the French. The rooms are in general built with open fire-places.

The number of inhabitants at present is

placed at thirty to forty thousand – with what certainty I am not prepared to say. A strict numbering of the inhabitants is difficult in America, where people are continually moving about, leaving a place or coming in.

Pennsylvania, and in consequence Philadelphia, assures freedom to all religious sects. Men of all faiths, and many of none, dwell together in harmony and peace. The spirit of tolerance has gone so far that different religious sects have assisted one another in the building of houses of worship. At the present time there are in Philadelphia more than thirty such buildings.

A college in Philadelphia founded for the instruction of the young was raised to a University in the year 1780. The University consists of two departments, the Academy or lower preparatory schools for younger students, and the University proper, where the higher sciences, Philosophy, Mathematics, and Medicine are taught.

The science of Medicine has the most Professors. None of them has a fixed salary, but they earn considerable sums, according to the number of those attending their lectures. Candidates for the degree of Doctor in Medicine, it is said, are exactly and strictly examined. But with the degree the practitioner has no advantage over other practitioners and bunglers, except as he himself chooses to make much of his diploma.

In America every man who is in the curing trade is known without distinction as Doctor, as elsewhere every person who makes verses is a poet, so there are both bad doctors and quacks [deliberate frauds] in abundance.

Libraries also Philadelphia possesses. A taste for reading is pretty widespread. People of all classes use the library on Carpenter Street. Benjamin Franklin, supported

particularly by Quakers, began this library as early as 1732 by the creation of a Reading Society. The rooms are open to the public twice a week in the afternoon, but the members of the society have access every day. In an adjoining room several mathematical and physical instruments are also kept, as also a collection of American minerals.

There are eight to ten newspapers, weekly sheets in large folio [folded paper]. Of them all the *Independent Chronicle* is the favorite on account of its freedom in regard to public affairs. Liberty of the press was one of the fundamental laws which the states included in the design of their new governments.

It arouses the sympathies to see how often the Congress is mistreated in these sheets. The financier, Bob Morris, recently found himself slandered [falsely criticized] by an article in the *Independent Chronicle* and began a lawsuit. But the public supported the printer and as free citizens asserted their right to communicate to one another their opinions regarding the conduct of public officials. But it must be said that through the misuse of so special a privilege great harm may arise. How many upright and innocent characters are roughly treated under the shield of the freedom of the press!

People think, act, and speak here precisely as it prompts them. The poorest day-laborer on the bank of the Delaware River holds it his right to advance his opinion, in religious as well as political matters, with as much freedom as the gentleman or the scholar. And as yet there is to be found as little distinction of rank among the inhabitants of Philadelphia as in any city in the world.

No one admits that the Governor has any particular superiority over the private citizen except in so far as he is the right hand of the law, and the law equally regards and deals

with all citizens. Riches make no difference, because in this regard every man expects at one time or another to be on a footing with his rich neighbor. Rank of birth is not recognized, and is resisted with a total force.

The Philadelphia market deserves a visit from every foreigner. Astonishment is excited not only by the



extraordinary store of provisions but also by the cleanliness and the good order in which the stock is exposed for sale. On the evenings before the chief market days (Wednesdays and Saturdays) all the bells in the city are rung.

People come into Philadelphia in great covered wagons. Numerous carts and horses bring in from all directions the rich surplus of the countryside. Everything is full of life and action.

Besides the customary sorts of meat, Europeans find in season several dishes new to them, such as raccoons, opossums, otters, bear-bacon and bear's foot, as well as many local birds and fishes. All sorts of melons and many kinds of pumpkins are seen in great quantity, and fruits also.

The war has left no sign of want [poverty or shortages] here. The inhabitants are not only well clothed but well fed, and comparatively, better than in Europe.

**Group Discussion:** *What were Americans like, and what did they value, in the 1780s? What aspects of American life described here have changed since this account was written? What aspects of American life have not changed?*